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THE HIDDEN SIDE OF TRANSPARENCY AMONG GOVERNMENT AGENCY BLOGGERS

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Abstract. This paper shows and discusses blogs as social action in a corporate context by investigating and seeking to understand organizational bloggers' motivations and discursive behaviors in the contextual and cultural diversity of a blog-setting. Providing empirical findings on the possibilities and limitations that are embedded in an organizational blog in a government agency context, traced through focus group interviews of the organizational bloggers, the paper shows that culturally bound limitations exist and are exposed when implementing an open-source social technology like the weblog. People, even within the same organization, have different goals in relation to the same technology, and the transparency of the blog and the blog comments is managed differently by the internal bloggers. Through the discussion of the different cultural discourses at work in the blog, diverging roles and dilemmas that the blogging employees meet when engaging in corporate blogging are exposed and discussed. The aim of the paper is to discuss the social implications of these different cultural discourses in a corporate blog and how corporate cultural tensions emerge because of the blog. The paper pinpoints the problematic of transparency through pointing out conflicting goals, roles and the resulting self-censorship by bloggers as they operate in an environment that is increasingly transparent, and shows examples of how the group of bloggers with the shared narrative tradition is able to mobilize its members and create subgroups for appropriate blog behaviors and changing behavior due to self-censorship, as well as identification with the key actors in the group.

1. Introduction

Social media – internet-based applications such as (we)blogs, social network sites, online chat forums, text messages, micro blogs, and location-based communication services used from computers and smart phones - have diffused profoundly as platforms of interpersonal communication and sociality in everyday life (Lomborg, 2011) as well as in business communication. The functional definition of weblogs (blogs) classify them as frequently modified webpages, either as part of an existing webpage or as a separate webpage (Herring, et al., 2004, 1). However, in this paper, the boundaries of blogs are approached as socially constructed, not technologically defined (Efimova, 2009, 23), and blogs are located as a situated communicative practice, manifested in the user's engagement in the production of 'text' and in the practices of interacting with fellow users.

The aim of this paper is to show and discuss these culturally discursive analytical implications of the transparency of blogging in a government agency's internal blog-community by looking at a specific case of a Danish government agency, the Patent and Trademark Office (DKPTO)[1], and its blogging activities towards external publics. When an organization as DKPTO set out to manage their communications in accordance with the corporate ideal of transparency and you make the users co-producers (i.e. *produsage*, Bruns & Jacobs, 2006, 6), they are transparent not only to their publics but also to themselves (Christensen, 2002, 162). Corporate culture in this sense refers to those activities critical for the implementation of strategy and for generating widespread understanding and commitment among the organization's members.

The paper will start out by giving a brief look into organizational culture, communication and transparency in relation to organizational blogs by presenting some writings and different approaches to these concepts and how they relate. Next, the transparency on a government agency blog will be discussed through the presentation of examples of instances of cultural discourses and some of the social implications that follow the increased transparency such as social validation and social control, and discuss some of the consequences and how this affect the practice of blogging inside the organization.

2. The Organizational Culture, Communication Practice and Transparency of Blogging

On a promise of blogs and blogging representing the missing link or metaphor and paradigm for the ultimate software on which the knowledge society will operate, Kline & Burstein (as well as many other blog practitioners and 'evangelists', e.g. Scoble & Israel, 2006, Clay Shirky, 2008) argue that blogs derive from the human urge to give voice to our ideas, to have our ideas understood, acted on, and remembered, and to engage in the quest for knowledge and understanding interactively and collaboratively. Kline & Burstein refer to blogging in a 'global culture' and also touch upon blogging inside the business world, predicting that business will be changed profoundly as well, just as politics and other aspects of our culture are morphing as a result both of what is said in the blogosphere and the process of saying it. However, despite this alleged global culture and promises of digital collaboration and interaction that blogs are one of the first representatives of, blogging generally is being conceptualized differently in distinct cultural contexts. By looking at local contexts, it is possible to develop more nuanced assessments of how blogospheres variously serve communication needs, how they exist in relation to one another, how they explore identity, where they exist apart as well as where they overlap and how they interact with other forms of communication (Russel & Echchaibi, 2009, 8).

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[1] The company website: http://www.dkpto.org/

Among the various definitions of transparency that can be found in the field of Corporate Communication, Christensen (2002) takes up the assumption in the field that corporate communication operates in a context of transparency and that transparency is an appropriate managerial response to that context. He defines transparency by looking at corporate transparency as a staging process that involves strategic disclosure, institutionalization and mimetic behavior. Transparency is seen as a form of expressive communication with stakeholders. In the current business environment, internal and external stakeholders not only expect to have unrestricted access to corporate information but also demand that organizations are held accountable for their strategic choices making organizations of today feel more vulnerable and, in a sense, transparent than ever before. Christensen points to how the introduction of new communication technologies, most notably the Internet, has intensified this feeling considerably because organizations are expected to contribute to transparency themselves by sharing relevant information with their surroundings (Christensen, 2002, 163). Hence, transparency is considered both a condition and a strategy, and Christensen questions if it is possible to articulate the challenge of corporate transparency in alternative, strategic terms. In accordance with this definition, transparency is highly related to visibility which, when related to blogging, is one of the basic premises, i.e. to expose information and communication from bloggers making them and their knowledge visible while also opening up for the outside to give feedback openly. This means that the blog increases visibility in relation to both the individual employee who becomes a blogger and increases transparency in the reactions from outside of the organization (exemplified by blog-comments or other online or ‘offline’ reactions to blog content from the audience).

Tracing the concept of transparency in relation to blogs further, Miller & Shepherd (2004) point to voyeurism and exhibitionism in their genre analysis of the blog, arguing that the social psychology of self-disclosure, which serve four purposes – self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control – are all seen in blogs. In the work of Efimova (2009) on knowledge workers’ blog-practices, visibility is discovered as a crucial element when employees’ blog. While visibility might be a driving force for blogging and a reason for many positive effects it brings (e.g. ideas and people being found), bloggers also have to deal with the effects of visibility and deal with expansion of networks and information overload, changes in power distribution when crossing hierarchical or organizational boundaries, raised expectations and making mistakes in public (Efimova, 2009). The bloggers have to make choices and draw the boundaries in their position as corporate bloggers, blogging on behalf of the organization. Hence, a great part of blogging practices in an organization is concerned not only with co-production, knowledge sharing and interaction, but also, and sometimes dominantly, with the employees having to learn how to deal with fragmentation, abundance and issues of social control (Agerdal-Hjermind, 2010).

In approaching the notion of transparency in blogging, this paper looks at ways in which corporate bloggers working with information about patents and design rights use transparency as both telling and not telling to maintain their reputation, identity and ethos for both internal and external audiences in the organization. The bloggers use both knowledge and the omission of knowledge in order to both build trust at the intersection of internal and external audiences and to assert their identity as professionals, leveraging a combination of trust and knowledge to frame their public ethos.

One approach to culture is to treat it as an overarching macro concept influencing the larger social system; in contrast, it can be observed on the micro-, interactional level, exemplified in relationships, emotions, and small groups (Fine, 1995, 127). The case study presented in this paper grows from this micro cultural perspective: the internal culture within an organizational blog-community. The use of cultural discourse analysis on a communication instance like the organizational blog can say something about the meaningfulness of a practice to participants and can also be used to construct an interpretative account of the discursive practice (Carbaugh, 2007, 179). Treating a community culturally through discourse allows for the investigation of the processes by which the blog is interpreted by its members: ‘In cultural terms it is useful to conceive of a social movement (or, for that matter, any group or organization) as a space in which actors interact; it is, in other words, a staging area for behavior’ (Fine, 1995, 129). Every group develops a culture: a bounded set of images and traditions that come to characterize those individuals to themselves and often to outsiders, an idioculture which develops in interacting collectivities in which members share at least one trait (in this case that they are appointed to be bloggers). An idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and which they can employ as the basis of further interaction. The DKPTO-bloggers have developed such an idioculture. Culture only becomes meaningful through its public performance and cultural forms are simultaneously a property of social actors, embedded within relationships, and also a property of the group or community (Fine, 1995, 129). ‘The real issue in this process is not so much whether organizations really are transparent to their stakeholders – or to themselves – but how corporate standards for transparency are defined and developed, who the major players in this process are, how different voices are integrated, etc.’ (Christensen, 2002, 167). I address the organizational blog-community as a bundle of narratives, which, when expressed within an interactional arena by participants, strengthens the commitment of members to shared organizational goals in the face of external audiences watching. In addition to the positive, binding functions of narratives, demands of audiences for assent and emotional response and for the production of comparable stories serve as forms of social control. In the analysis presented in this paper, I describe the process by which a collective group culture is established within a group of internal blog-actors, examining the group as a social arena (Clarke, 2005). The group serves as a place of cultural enactment, where values take form and are invested with shared meaning (Fine, 1995, 130). Narrative is a crucial cultural domain in constructing shared meaning and group cohesion, and it contributes to organizational identity (Fine 1995, 133).

The empirical findings of this paper are based upon the view that communication both presumes and constitutes social realities, and that, as people communicate, they engage in a meta-cultural commentary, that is they say things explicitly and implicitly about who they are, how they are related to each other, how they feel, what they are doing, and how they are situated in the nature of things. All concerns about identity, relationships, emotions, actions, and dwelling are central concepts in cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007). 'An identity emerges for each of us only out of efforts at control amid contingencies and contentions in interaction. These control efforts need not have anything to do with domination over other identities. Before anything else, control is about finding footings among other identities. Such footings is a position that entails a stance, which brings orientation in relation to other identities (…) The control efforts by one identity are social realities for other identities' (White, 2008, 1). The discourses presented encapsulate how the increased transparency that the blog represents has led to social control among some of the blogging employees in the sense White describes as 'finding footings among other identities', and manifested in self-censorship in the blog-behavior. The concept, cultural discourse, is used systematically to organize ways of understanding how culture (in this case local organizational culture) is an integral part and product of discourse systems (in this case the organizational blog). Focus is on the interactional dynamics that occur among culturally shaped communication practices (Carbaugh, 2007).

3. Transparency on a Government Agency Blog: Self-disclosure, social control and self-censorship

Based on an empirical investigation of the DKPTO-weblog, and the organizational bloggers through focus group interviews of 19 employee bloggers (data gathering technique) and a situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) (data analysis techniques) in a discourse analytical perspective, access is provided to organisational bloggers' longitudinal contextualized experience with the medium, the result being a nuanced and deep understanding of the phenomenon from an employees' perspective.

Discourse research offers routes into the study of meanings, and is a way of investigating the back-and-forth dialogues which constitute social action, along with the patterns of signification and representation which constitute culture (Wetherell & Taylor, 2001). Since I am interested in the attitudes and opinions of the bloggers, i.e. their sense-making as bloggers, the focus within discourse analysis is on discourse psychology, not as a method, but a perspective, with interaction as the primary site where psychological issues are live. The analysis is centered around organizing as a discursive practice from describing how the members of an organization speak of and understand their usage of the weblog and the implications of this.

DKPTO is part of the Danish Ministry of Business and Growth and hold the authority to issue Patent and Design Rights and register Trademarks. The agency entered the blogosphere in 2005 when blogs were an almost unknown phenomenon in a Danish organisational context and hence hold the title as corporate blog-pioneers and the first public authority in Denmark to engage in blogging. The internal blog-community at DKPTO is represented by a broad and varied group of employees blogging on the same blog, a group blog, and is an example of organizational blogging as a multi-complex form of communications with corresponding multi-dimensional behavior to multi motivations. On one side, the blog is an open communication technology aimed at a broad range of stakeholders and hence meets the demands of management's high priority of the government agency's corporate strategy of an increased open digital communication with the publics. On the other side, employees are faced with and have to deal with being measured on their blog activity (on frequency, and not content) at the same time as handling their primary work tasks and protecting themselves from potential trouble from readers. This implies being cautious and 'looking over their shoulders regarding what content they generate. Among the implications of this, the thematic network analysis of the motivation of the organizational bloggers shows that self-censorship is a common consequence. The self-censorship traces back to the official 'government agency' culture that follows being a public authority.

One approach could be to focus on how the technology shapes the communication as would be the case from a social-technical perspective focusing on the co-shaping of the social and the technical that takes place when people blog. However, the paper puts a particular focus on how the communication practice of the DKPTO employee bloggers is culturally shaping the blog and how the transparency towards the publics inherent in the blogging practice is subject to a conflict of opinions among the different blog voices. The starting point of the blog was to change communication practice into being more open and informal – some bloggers did that, and some still do, e.g. the Guess a Patent online 'competition' being posted every Friday, which is considered one of the most informal and entertaining posts on the blog. The informal guessing 'competition' is not related to the authority's official communication, but a 'relaxing point' where external and internal users of the blog can meet on the blog about something not directly work related and hence less complicated to blog about and less bound to rise critical discussions. Some see this as a possibility to show another more personal side of the organization and the individual employees. There is the engineer who works with confidential cases and has little communication with the publics in relation to that kind of work tasks, and hence use the blog to post news stories within his field of expertise that are interesting to him and others. He calls it 'a break' and variation in the daily work, and hopes for constructive feedback from external (and internal) fellow knowledge workers. However, examples are also appearing of bloggers who wanted to use the blog for more informal and 'amusing' writings on boundary subjects, not directly relevant to specific work tasks (like the guessing competition) but who changed their blog behavior into writing more serious content as a result of social control of the critical voices inside the organization:

> Thomas: In the beginning I tried to keep my blog posts light-hearted and entertaining, but I have stopped doing that, or at least I am trying not to do that anymore [I: Why?] (long pause...) Thomas: I think there has been so many discussions on what we are going to use the blog for, that I did not want to keep on writing that way (Focus group 4, ll. 411-414)

What Thomas is referring to are the internal discussions in the organization about whether the blog should be used only for the official messages for the professional users of the authority, and/or the more informal, light-hearted and colloquial stories or diary-like posts about the daily life in a public organization which are not representing the directly official information, but more indirectly related or relevant. These discussions are centered around how to manage the blog transparency. What should be and what should not be transparent to the agency itself and the audience. I have chosen the light-hearted and more information blogs posts as one of the many examples of type of blog content that leads to discussions on whether to make visible this kind of information and potential communication or not. In its format and the blog strategy, management invites all kinds of blog posts, which means that it is the employee-blogger him-, or herself who decides the content, consequently giving rise to these discussions. One of the main critics of the more informal, entertaining and light-hearted stories on the blog is Mads, considering these to be irrelevant and even damaging to the company to let the audience see such an informal and less official side of the organization. In this instance we find him in a discussion with his colleague Anna:

> Mads: I think there is a huge different between writing in a glib and superficial manner (…) We have to remember that our audience is a conservative industry, and consider how they see us. And I think we have crossed the border and have too much of the irrelevant and light-hearted content on the blog. So we need to make a clear decision on what we write about, when we write it, what we use it for and how we write it, etc. [Anna: But do you want the blog content to be all the same? Is it because you think it is messy?] Mads: It is one among many communication channels, and what is being written in one end of the blog affects the rest of the blog content. It affects all of us if the entertaining, light-hearted, not serious and, God knows what, that people post on that blog, content dominate the blog… [Anna: So that means you're afraid of not being taken serious when a blogger writes an entertaining story with a not official message?] Mads: The organization is not being taken serious if we don't act seriously. That's the way it is (Focus group 4, ll. 546-561).

This is just one example of the paradoxes and counter discourses in the blog usage that appear in the focus groups when the bloggers are asked to reflect on their blog practice. There is a group of bloggers (Mads being one representative) who consider the manifold use of the blog for both directly relevant and official communication as well as the informal, light-hearted content, such as the 'guess a patent competition', to be noise. Furthermore, this group of bloggers oppose strongly to the internal bloggers who put in their guess and participate alongside the external audience in the Friday competitions. One blogger states that he finds it embarrassing when an organization is making itself visible by talking with itself on an external blog. On the other side, there is a group of bloggers who consider the multifarious usage of the blog for both the official and formal as well as the informal, light-hearted and entertaining communication, and both internal and external participating in the comments sections, as one of the greatest strengths of the blog. They would refer to the blog as 'a box of chocolates' with a varied and mixed content (mix of all kinds of news, both formal and serious and the more easy-going informal and light-hearted stories, news and competitions) (represented here by Anna). Transparency in the sense of visibility of corporate matters and matters that border to personal matters on the blog hence lead to the employee-bloggers having to make themselves clear on what side they are on, or stay neutral (like Thomas who changed his blog behavior). Because of this social control, the content on the blog is affected and the bloggers have to ask themselves (and management don't do it for them) how far away from the official discourse do they dare to go in showing another and more personal side of their work and other more or less work related stories on the blog? Anna, on one hand, would have absolutely no problem in commenting on something that an internal blogger has written, whereas Mads (and quite a lot of the other bloggers) would not even consider it, and also call for the whole organization to not do so but instead stay formal and stick to corporate messages with a clear relevance to the audience.

Another bi-product of this dilemma is the discussion on the personal vs. professional schism that appear from the transparency on the blog. The blog in its format and style calls for a more personal touch than other communication forms in the organization, but it seems from the focus group interactions that the social control of the group is enacted. In the following example, a head of department who is not a very active blogger anymore, but instead inspires and motivates his employees to blog, is expressing his social norms and limits of blog content and his social validation of the allowed degree of personal touch:

> Kurt: (…) I think carefully about what I encourage them to write about. Because I might ask Steen to blog about the diploma degree he is taking in Sweden, but I do not encourage anyone to write about the course they are participating in because of a re-structuring in the department. I would never encourage anyone to write personally about his or her experiences of learning how to sell. Imagine what kind of blog that would lead to! You have to make a judgment of what should be on that blog [I: Is that because this kind of story would fit better on e.g. the Intranet, or not fit at all?] Kurt: Not fit at all… [Lennart: No, if people have a personal blog, they can damn well write it on that one] (Focus group 2, ll. 365-377)..

These kinds of internal discussions and negotiations on what to say and what not to say publicly are obviously very common in many organizations, but the interesting point in this case is that the discussions are reflections about an actual blog usage, i.e. they take place after and on the basis of actual writings publicly on the blog, and they very much arise due to the visible, open and social format of the blog, a communications form not seen and used before in the organization. This gives us an insight into the bloggers' process of (re)defining their blog behavior and degree of transparency. In that way, the transparency becomes the catalyzer for the discussions, and internal disagreement, counter discourses and subgroups are emerging, i.e. the 'skeptical ones' and the 'open ones' according to their view on how transparent and on which content to be transparent. From a corporate communication perspective it is interesting that no coordinated plan or strategy seems to have been followed like the authority normally do in their communications, and hence the 'open' communication technology represented by the blog also leave the discussion of its actual usage open for discussion among the employees while they are in the process of blogging.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented and discussed empirical findings from focus group interactions and reflections on instances of how transparency on a government agency blog has led to social validation and social control, and ultimately leading to self-censorship in the blog behavior of a large group of government agency bloggers at the Danish Patent and Trademark Office. The use of cultural discourse analysis on a communication instance like the organizational blog, can say something about the meaningfulness of a practice to participants, and can also be used to construct an interpretative account of the discursive practice. The analysis provides an understanding of how the micro-level culture within an organizational blog-community is shaping the blog-communication practice. Shedding light on the transparency that follows the organizational blog, a process through which a blog-culture is developed and the social implications of this organizational blogging process have appeared in the form of distinct discursive behaviors. In this present case study, particularly the social validation and social control are predominant effects of the blog transparency, leading to self-restriction behavior in expression among several of the organizational bloggers. The thematic network analysis of their motivation shows that there is a constant evaluation going on in the blog-community of what the members consider to be allowed to be said publicly and what is not. Particularly the social validation and social control are predominant effects of the blog transparency.

The DKPTO-blog has proven to make transparent a social control system that has probably already been operating in the organization but becomes even more visible with the appearance of the blog. The increased transparency and involvement create counter discourses and conflicting views on how to operate in the internal blog community, and corporate cultural tensions emerge. The analysis shows how the employee-bloggers are affected. For some bloggers, the social validation of other bloggers has led to a shift in their blog behavior, others form subgroups and redefine their blog-behavior according to a socially controlled group of critics, pledging for at blog free of what they consider irrelevant and too light-hearted and informal information, and another group who consider the mix and variation in content to be one of the greatest strengths of the blog and a personal motivation for blogging. The analysis indicates that the corporate culture already dominant in an organization sets out the norms and validation, and in some cases overrules, the implementation of an open communication technology, like the organizational blog. The communication practice of the DKPTO-employees is culturally shaping the blog, and not the other way around.

The main contribution of the paper is to show this ‘hidden’ side of the transparency of blogging, the normally hidden cultural discourses that are affecting a communication-practice like organizational blogging, and the ‘other’ side of transparency as an embedded part of an organization’s communication with the external publics. Issues of transparency emerge such as social control and self-censorship. Another contribution of this paper is enlightening the issue whether the blog is helping or hindering transparency in a particular organization, and for the organization to be sensitive to these organizational norms that are appearing and how they affect employees. The employees’ reflections on the organizational blog allow the organization to (re)define their strategy of transparency and their boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between openness and closure.

In this study I consider the people behind blogging as the primary interest, and interview talk is the main data resource, analyzing the underlying motives and the participants interpretation of their practice. In light of this, future research should be an analysis of the external stakeholder’s perspective on the blog communication and its implications through an analysis of the external contributions to blogging. Given the extrinsic influence on how the publics perceive the blog, which several bloggers indicate as crucial for their blog behavior and decisions on transparency, insights on the external audiences' perception of the blog and its varied content would be relevant for future analysis. A systematic empirical analysis of blogs themselves would likewise be highly relevant to get a more complete insight into the social practice of blogging.

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